

Miguel de Beistegui

The New Heidegger

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The New Heidegger

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Miguel de Beistegui

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Contents

List of Abbreviations	vi
Introduction	1
1. A Matter of Life	8
2. The Truth that Lies Beneath	30
3. Of Space and Time	60
4. The Grip of Technology	97
5. The Saving Power of Art	125
6. Politically Adrift: The Affair with National Socialism	155
Concluding Remarks	180
Appendix 1 A Brief, Philosophical Biography	184
Appendix 2 Existential Philosophy and Psychotherapy	187
Appendix 3 Heidegger and the Greeks	191
Appendix 4 Hermeneutics after Heidegger: The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer	194
Appendix 5 Philosophy and Architecture	196
Appendix 6 Derrida and Deconstruction	198
Appendix 7 Human vs Artificial Intelligence	200
Bibliography	203
Index	207

List of Abbreviations

Works are cited in the original German pagination, and followed by pagination in translation, where there is one. Translations have often been modified.

- BDT. 'Building Dwelling Thinking', translated by Albert Hofstadter, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
- BW. *Basic Writings* (ed.) David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- EM. *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyr Verlag, 1953); translated by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).
- G. *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959); translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
- GA 6. 1. *Nietzsche* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), pp. 1–220; translated by David Farrell Krell, *Nietzsche*, Vol. I. *The Will to Power as Art* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).
- GA 13. *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983).
- GA 19. *Platon: Sophistes*, Gesamtausgabe Band 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992); translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer, *Plato's Sophist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
- GA 21. *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*, Gesamtausgabe Band 21 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976).
- GA 24. *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Gesamtausgabe Band 24 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975); translated by Albert Hofstadter, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
- GA 29/30. *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*, Gesamtausgabe Band 29/30 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983); translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- GA 45. *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte 'Probleme' der Logik*, Gesamtausgabe Band 45 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984); translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected 'Problems' of Logic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

- GA 53. *Hölderlin's Hymne 'Der Ister'*, Gesamtausgabe Band 53 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984); translated by William McNeill and Julia Davis, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
- GA 54. *Parmenides*, Gesamtausgabe Band 54 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982); translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, *Parmenides* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
- GA 55. *Heraklit. Der Anfang des abenländischen Denkens Logik. Heraklits Lehre vom Logos*, Gesamtausgabe Band 55 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979).
- GA 56/57. *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, Gesamtausgabe Band 56/57 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987); translated by Ted Sadler, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy* (London: Athlone, 2000).
- GA 63. *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)*, Gesamtausgabe Band 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1982); translated by John van Buren, *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- GA 65. *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, Gesamtausgabe Band 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989); translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- GA 66. *Besinnung*, Gesamtausgabe Band 66 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997).
- GA 67. *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*, Gesamtausgabe Band 67 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1999).
- GA 69. *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, Gesamtausgabe Band 66 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998).
- Hw. *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950/1980); edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- KL. 'Kassel lectures', *Dilthey-Jahrbuch*, Vol. 8, 1992–3.
- OA. *De l'origine de l'œuvre d'art. Première version (1935)*; edited and translated by Emmanuel Martineau (Paris: Authentica, 1987).
- SD. *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1969).
- SDU. *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983); translated by Lisa Harries as 'The Self-Assertion of the German University', in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism* (ed.) Karsten Harries (New York: Paragon House, 1990).
- Supplements. *From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond* (ed.) John van Buren (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002).
- SZ. *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1927); translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
- TK. *Die Technik und die Kehre* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1962); translated by William Lovitt as 'The Question Concerning Technology', in

Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings (ed.) David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

UK. 'Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes. Erste Ausarbeitung', *Heidegger Studies*, Vol. 5, 1989, pp. 5–22.

WhD. *Was heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1954); translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, *What is called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

Wm. *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967/1976); translated by William McNeill et. al. *Pathmarks* (ed.) William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Introduction

On one level, the aim of this book is quite simple: it is to give a sense of the magnitude of the philosophical earthquake that Heidegger's thought represents. Also – and as an immediate consequence – it is an attempt to communicate the excitement that so many of us have felt and continue to feel whenever we discover a new lecture course, a new text by Heidegger or when we open *Being and Time* for the thousandth time. I hope to communicate the significance of this earthquake, this vertigo to anyone who has a minimal knowledge of the history of philosophy (or perhaps not even). No prior knowledge of Heidegger is required. Heidegger is a notoriously difficult thinker (all thinkers are, in my view), not least because of his experimental use of the German idiom, which is a direct expression of the novelty of his thought. These difficulties are often intensified when translated into a different idiom, such as English. On the issue of language, of concepts and neologisms, let me simply say this: every great thinker is an inventor – an inventor of concepts. Why? Not for the sake of inventing concepts (as if this were an easy thing to do), of clouding issues and making things difficult for the reader, but simply because, driven by an inexorable need to take problems further, or in a different direction, the great thinker thinks precisely at the limit of what has been thought up until then, and so at the limit of conceptual language itself. Why *concepts*? Because this is the tool with which philosophy thinks. Mathematicians 'think' with numbers and symbols, artists 'think' with colours, shapes and materials, poets 'think' with images and metaphors and philosophers think with concepts. Because philosophers operate at the limit, because they feel compelled to push further and to broaden the horizon of thinking, they often find themselves at odds with language. This doesn't mean that they don't write elegantly. The history of philosophy has its share of elegant writers, as well as clumsy ones. The elegant writers (Plato, Descartes, Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson, Foucault, to name just a few) are deceptively 'easy', though. They too are pushing language to the limit, although differently – much in the way of great novelists. The work that is required of the reader is certainly as great as when reading the most heavily conceptual writer. Heidegger's prose evolved from the very conceptual (in which he forges a whole set of concepts and creates neologisms) to the (apparently) more 'literary'. Beginning in the 1930s, he works in the direction of a certain purity of language, resorting to aphorisms, fragments, and turning increasingly to poetry

as a resource for thinking beyond classical metaphysics. To say that, as a result, the 'later' Heidegger is more immediately accessible than the 'early' would be a serious mistake. Anyone who has read him has experienced the increasingly radical and demanding evolution of his thought. All of this to say that there is an *irreducibly* experimental side to any great philosophy, much in the same way that there is something experimental in Cézanne or Picasso, Debussy or Joyce. All try to invent a new idiom. This experimental dimension is precisely where thinking at the limit takes place, where the singularity of a given thought is being shaped. It is the place at which the greatest effort is demanded on the part of the reader. It is also where the greatest reward is obtained. Anyone who claims that an immediate, effortless access to the *genuinely* new is possible, anyone who claims that the substance and core of, say, a philosopher's thought can be extracted and communicated without treading the difficult path of his or her own negotiation with a tradition and its language is but a charlatan. That being said, I have tried to keep the technical vocabulary to a minimum in what follows, and have introduced it only progressively. I hope not to have shied away from the most challenging aspects of Heidegger's thought. But I also hope to have presented them in a way that is clear and accessible. This is an introduction to Heidegger's thought. It is not, however, an attempt to dilute it to the point of betraying its complexity and subtlety.

Let me now turn to the title of this book, *The New Heidegger*. By 'new', we need to understand the following: of the roughly 100 volumes planned in Heidegger's complete works, 'only' 50 have been published so far. Heidegger died in 1976. Since then, his texts (lecture courses, books, public lectures) have been slowly released (too slowly, many of us believe). There is, so far as I know, no clear date by which the whole of his work is supposed to have been released. But we have every reason to believe that the first couple of decades of this century will continue to see the publication of works by this thinker who entered the philosophical scene in the most spectacular way in 1927, the year in which *Being and Time*, to this day his most widely read and significant text, was published. All of this to say that, by virtue of Heidegger's own literary estate, there is always something new 'about' – by – Heidegger. The Heideggerian continent is still being charted. Over the years, we have gained a reasonably good knowledge of it. Much of it still needs to be discovered, though, as each volume that is being released reveals its share of surprises. This is a continent that, in many respects, is still in the making. And so, in writing this introductory book, I have tried to incorporate as much of the newly released material as possible – with the following limitations, however: since I hope to direct the reader to the original texts discussed, I cannot presume that he or she knows German, and so have deliberately focused on those recent texts that are available in translation. On a few occasions, however, and only briefly, have I taken the liberty of referring to untranslated texts.

So, what's new in this continent that we can call *Heideggeriana*? The last decade or so has witnessed the publication of some of Heidegger's most important (and most challenging) work. Almost all of it dates from the late 1930s.

These volumes are particularly illuminating as regards Heidegger's views on nihilism and 'machination', the (post)human and the divine, the death of God and/or the flight of the gods (or Nietzsche and Hölderlin), language and poetry, space and time and, above all, truth. At the same time, some of his very early lecture courses and various texts have been translated, thus providing the English reader with a deeper and clearer understanding of his relation to Greek and medieval philosophy, the so-called 'life-philosophy' of Dilthey, Protestant theology and Neo-kantianism. As a result, we have a more precise picture of his itinerary leading up to the publication of *Being and Time*. I shall draw on the earlier work to the extent that it allows me to shed light on questions and problems that are recurrent in his thought.

This approach does not mean that I have neglected the 'old', hugely influential and now canonical texts. But since there are already quite a few general introductions and commentaries available (on *Being and Time*, for example), I have not felt the need to add to those by focusing on *Being and Time* alone. Instead, I have decided to privilege a thematic approach to the content of Heidegger's thought, there again emphasizing those aspects that most clearly come out of his recently released production. In dealing with such themes, I have adopted a principle of continuity: by looking at how a given question recurs time and again in his thought, I am able to shed light on the evolution, the twists and turns of that thought. Every theme discussed is a valid point of entry into the whole of his thought. Ultimately, they all lead to one another and refer back to the same problem, or the 'matter' of Heidegger's thought (the question of being). The reader should feel free to explore this book in whichever order he or she deems fit. The first, introductory chapter is perhaps the only exception to this rule, and should be read before all the others. That being said, there is a definite continuity between the various chapters, each starting where the previous one finished. Whilst laying the philosophical foundations for the book as a whole, Chapters 2 and 3 are also the most complex and demanding and could, as such, be left to the end.

A second way in which I understand the title includes, as would be expected, the most significant developments in the literature on Heidegger. For the most part, these amount to substantial advances in the area of Heidegger's biography, and in the genesis of his thought. The works of scholars such as Ott, Safranski, Kiesel and Sheehan have allowed us to reconstruct Heidegger's early years as a thinker, casting light on his relation to Catholicism and Christianity, Neo-Kantianism, logic, mathematics and the natural sciences and Husserlian phenomenology. But they have also allowed us to understand better the details of Heidegger's action as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933–4 (as well as, to a an extent, the motivations behind his initial and unconditional support of National Socialism). This introduction to Heidegger's philosophy will not involve a biographical chapter as such, but a short appendix (Appendix 1), in which I stress the aspects of his family background, his education, his influences and his teaching, leading up to the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927. Drawing on

Heidegger's own insistence that every thought is factually embedded, that is, rooted in one's being as existence, and in one's own history, however, I shall show the extent to which aspects of his thought can be illuminated from a historical and biographical perspective. For example, the first chapter, devoted to Heidegger's conception of philosophy's relation to life, and to the genuinely philosophical life, will allow me to incorporate elements of his early years; the chapter on politics will quite naturally include references to his action and his speeches as the first Nazi rector of the University of Freiburg. At the same time, however, and precisely to the extent that, for Heidegger, his life as a thinker was indistinguishable from his life in general, it cannot be a question of falling into the trap of clarifying his thought by turning to historical, biographical or sociological analyses. His philosophy sheds light on the most crucial aspects of his biography, as much as the latter helps us to clarify aspects of the former.

Finally – albeit perhaps less explicitly – *The New Heidegger* aims to give a sense of the extraordinary impact of Heidegger's thought on twentieth-century philosophical and non-philosophical life. His is a thought that opened up entire areas, and helped to think afresh more classical ones. These include: phenomenology, deconstruction, hermeneutics, ontology, art and architecture, human and artificial intelligence, psychotherapy and ecology. Many of the great European philosophers of the twentieth century, such as Arendt, Gadamer, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, are closely associated with this thought; other contemporary thinkers, whether inside or outside philosophy, are finding their inspiration in it. I do not get into the detail of any of these thoughts. I simply mention some of them, and include bibliographical references for those interested in pursuing them. They are windows (introduced in a series of Appendices) into a landscape at the edge of *Heideggeriana*. Ultimately, *The New Heidegger* is an invitation to explore a continent that is still being charted and the boundaries of which, some of you, one day, will perhaps push even further.

Most chapters are followed by a bibliography and by recommended further readings available in English.

Chapter 1 ('A Matter of Life') introduces philosophy as an activity or a possibility of life (or existence) itself, as what we could call a 'vital' activity. In that respect, it is like any other human activity. Philosophy's activity, though, differs from others in that it is directed towards life *itself*, and bears on life as the support (or the condition of possibility) of all activities. There is, therefore, an intertwining of life as the object to which philosophy directs itself and life as the subject on the basis of which philosophy is made possible. This is where the singularity of philosophy lies. Philosophy is the reflection or the bending of life back onto itself. In and through philosophy, life reveals itself to itself. As such, it also amounts to an intensification of life, to an increase in its potential. By contrast, science is seen as a process of de-vitalization (*Entlehnis*), however important and interesting it may be: the life that is presupposed in science is not the life that science thematizes. In passing, this chapter

addresses the delicate question of life's access to itself: if the object of investigation is my 'I am', in all its facticity and complexity, that is to say, as *lived*, how can I hold it in view, thematize it without distancing myself from it, and so turn it into an object, a mere *thing*? How can philosophy avoid devitalizing life itself when turning itself into a theoretical object? The answer involves an explanation of hermeneutic phenomenology as the true *method* of philosophy. Beyond this methodological question, this chapter reveals how Heidegger slowly came to identify life with the pre-theoretical, pre-epistemological sphere of concrete, everyday existence. It is as existent beings (Dasein) that we relate to the world, that the world affects us and matters to us. This relation constitutes the very essence of who we are. In isolating and describing rigorously this unrepresentable, unmathematizable layer of experience, Heidegger reveals a sense of being beyond (or rather beneath) that of naturalism. Philosophy becomes *fundamental* ontology.

Chapter 2 ('The Truth that Lies Beneath') deals with the question of truth. This is a question that, in many ways, coincides with the very subject matter of Heidegger's thought. But what does he mean by truth, once life or existence can no longer become an object of *scientific* investigation? What is truth outside its scientific frame of reference? The truth that Heidegger seeks to thematize is *pre-scientific*. This means less that it is indifferent to truth in the modern sense of the term, and more that it grounds it or makes it possible. Yet precisely to the extent that this modern sense has become dominant and goes largely unquestioned, the more primordial sense of truth, whilst always operative, remains covered over. Heidegger wants to retrieve this always presupposed, yet never acknowledged sense of truth. At stake in the question of truth is the possibility of understanding the way in which being is *there* (and this, from the start, is what Heidegger had in view with the word *Da-sein*). At stake is the possibility of describing the dimension of the 'there is', this dimension, at once everywhere and nowhere, that is implicated in the very place and time in which things find themselves. This chapter traces the evolution of Heidegger's thought on that question, from the early Sophist lectures (1924–5), through *Being and Time* (1927) and into 'On the Essence of Truth' (1930) and *Contributions to Philosophy* (1936–8).

Chapter 3 ('Of Space and Time') turns to the question of space and time from the point of view of life. Very early on, Heidegger arrives at the conviction that factual life, or existence, as the pre-theoretical 'ground' of metaphysical and scientific life, presupposes a different conception of space and time. Prior to the division of the world between two 'things' or 'substances' (*res cogitans* and *res corporea*, mind and body), there is another, deeper sense of world, which involves its own spatiality, and its own temporality. We moderns have come to identify space with geometrical space; the world is now equated with nature as it is represented in Galilean and Newtonian physics – a Euclidean surface in which 'things' are granted a position and a velocity, thus marking points along a trajectory. Similarly, time – still within the confines of classical mechanics – is but the *measure* of the distance between two such points. But,

Heidegger asks, is this space as we *live* it? Is this time as we *experience* it? Of course, we can ourselves be *turned* into such objects and our movements as bodies be modelled mathematically. But, in doing so, do we not also cover something over? Do we not forget that, from the start and necessarily, we always relate ourselves to this life that is being reified, precisely to the extent that we *are* it? So, we need to ask: Does this mathematical, physical description of our own position within a set of coordinates properly express our experience of 'where' we are? Does time as the measure of movement accurately describe our experience of ourselves as entities living in the world? This chapter explores the spatiality of the world from an existential–ontological perspective and reveals time (ecstatic temporality) as the unity of existence as 'being-in-the-world'.

Chapter 4 ('The Grip of Technology') extends the analysis of truth in its historical dimension by asking the question: What is the configuration of truth that befalls us *today*? What is the light in which things manifest themselves today? Heidegger's answer (namely, 'technology') is well known, but often misunderstood. In this chapter, I show the extent to which Western metaphysics and history are *essentially* technological, that is, governed from the start by an unquestioned conception of reality that is intrinsically *productivist*. What we are witnessing today, in the age of techno-science, cybernetics and the (intelligent) machine is nothing other than an acceleration and a revelation of a process initiated a very long time ago. By questioning technology with respect to its *essence*, and not only its various aspects, Heidegger concludes that it displays our destiny. It is at the end of that process, once it is revealed for what it is, that thought is perhaps in a position to initiate an altogether new beginning, and intimate a turning within history. The question is: What is the attitude that is going to replace that of technology? What sort of relation to the world – and to others – demands to be freed? Heidegger's response can be summarized in one word: letting-be (*Gelassenheit*).

Chapter 5 ('The Saving Power of Art') deals with Heidegger's conception of art and poetry as the antidote to technological and calculative thought. Art, for Heidegger, is the other, often hidden side of the essence of technology. It is a form of knowing, and of truth, yet one that does not unfold as production and machination, but as poetics. This singular conception of art presupposes that philosophy breaks with aesthetics, which remains bound to a productivist conception of art, and to a concept of truth that is intrinsically metaphysical. Heidegger's freeing of the *question* of art from the *philosophy* of art takes the form of a meditation on the work of art as the site or the place of an event that is quite literally counter-productive. This has nothing to do with celebrating a purely 'useless' conception of art ('art for art's sake'). Rather, it has to do with the possibility of identifying a space within which the essence of truth can be seen to be taking place. Drawing on a number of sources, I show how much of contemporary art is framed by the technological System that Heidegger describes, and so is indebted to a conception of truth that remains unquestioned. At the same time, however, I show how other works of art

develop the free relationship to technology that Heidegger advocates, precisely by turning to that which, structurally, technology itself cannot know. Art – a *certain* art – reveals the possibility of a different relation to the world, and to language as the primary medium in which this relation is played out.

Chapter 6 ('Politically Adrift: The Affair with National Socialism') deals with the most delicate and controversial aspect of Heidegger's thought and life. Heidegger's life was that of an academic and a philosopher. Given what he says concerning the facticity of life and the connection between life and philosophy, his political engagement cannot be set aside as a merely marginal episode. To say this, though, does not mean that Heidegger's thought is intrinsically fascist, as some have argued. In 1933, he became the first Nazi rector of the University of Freiburg. He resigned ten months later. In this final chapter, I refer to his speeches and actions from that period. I then try to present the reasons behind his political engagement. It is primarily as an academic that Heidegger enters the scene of politics, and as a thinker that he supports the Nazi revolution, in which he sees (although he was soon to realize the extent of his mistake) the unique possibility of a radical, historical change that would bring about a total transformation not only of the university, but also of the relationship between the university and society in general. It did, indeed, but not solely in the way in which Heidegger had anticipated, thereby forcing his resignation and his disillusionment with what, until the end of his life, and with a touch of regret at not having seen it develop its potential, he referred to as 'the movement'.

A Matter of Life

*... {m}an himself has become more enigmatic for us.
We ask anew: What is man? A transition, a direction, a storm sweeping
over our planet, a recurrence or a vexation for the gods?
We do not know. Yet we have seen that in the essence
of this mysterious being, philosophy happens.¹*

For many years, as a child, I had a recurrent nightmare. Slowly, but inevitably, I was drawn into what at first looked like a dark room (except that, in another version of the dream, the room was filled with white light). The dark grew darker (or the white whiter), until I realized there was no room whatsoever, and certainly nothing to be identified within it. My gaze was entirely absorbed by the ever-deepening black or white into which all things would dissolve, including my own gaze, threatening to engulf my entire self. I would not die, though. In fact, I was acutely aware of my own presence and my whole being, albeit in a way that was utterly painful. There was nothing to see, nothing to hold on to, to recognize or discover – not even the scariest of things. At that point, the presence of a thing, of anything, no matter how ominous, would have seemed infinitely reassuring in comparison with this pure light that was wrapping itself around me like a heavy cloth, wearing me down and threatening to choke me. My dream may not seem like much, but it was utterly terrifying. I would wake up in a sweat, petrified, and with just enough strength to call for my mother. ‘What’s wrong? What’s the matter?’ she would ask, rushing into my room, shocked by the expression of terror on my face. At first, I tried to tell her about the dream, but couldn’t find the right words. Part of my unease, and my general state of dread, was due to my inability to formulate my state of mind. It was as if, in the face of this faceless threat, language itself was of no avail. My description of the dream was bland, and totally unable to match the extreme nature of my emotional state. Language – this means of communication that, over the years, I had learned to master and trust – was failing me, as if forcing me to describe actual, concrete things, which my mother could understand as the cause of my disquiet, when, properly speaking, there was *nothing* to describe. And so, despite my obvious distress, but also quite naturally, my mother thought there was very little – if anything at all – to the dream, which she never could take seriously. How right she was! There was indeed *nothing* to it. Nothing at all: none of the monsters and crea-

tures I sometimes dreamed of, no loss or death of a beloved, no separation, no arguments – *nothing*. But wasn't this precisely the point? Could a dream about – and so an experience of – nothing be infinitely more dreadful, infinitely more unsettling and uncanny than a dream about something, however terrifying? There was indeed nothing to be afraid *of*. Yet was the absence of anything *specific* reason enough to dismiss the experience itself? Or was the absence of all things, the fact that I was denied access to anything in particular, not the clue to the meaning of the experience itself? Wasn't it the indication that, however paradoxical it may seem, we human beings can experience nothingness itself? But then, where does such an experience come from? What is the link between the *being* of being human and my experience of nothingness? And if this line of questioning is at all legitimate, why would it be a matter for philosophy (as opposed to, say, psychology)? What must be the definition, destination and purpose of philosophy, if it is to have anything to do with one's experience of nothingness? Could the possibility, as well as the destination of philosophy, be revealed to us in something as deeply personal, unsettling and existential in nature, as the experience of the nothing? Could philosophy be at all concerned with – and even triggered by – our experience of the abyss, in which our everyday familiarity with the world, and our very identity, come under threat?

Naturally, these are questions I was unable to formulate as a child. At the time, all I could do was wait for the deep unease and anxiety that would linger on for interminable moments after my mother had left me to recede, and eventually go back to sleep. Yet I had experienced, and somehow also discovered, the ground, or, better said perhaps, the abyss, from which, many years later, these questions would spring. It was only when, as an undergraduate, I first came across a lecture by Heidegger entitled 'What is Metaphysics?' (1929) that I was finally able to make sense of my old recurrent nightmare, the meaning of which my reading of Freud had not helped to clarify.² The literature on dreams and their signification is now abundant. Dreams are always understood as coded messages, as signs written in a mysterious language, which the specialist and expert alone is equipped to decode. No matter how indirect or veiled, dreams are always thought to be about something, and especially about our hidden, repressed desires and fears. They are essentially metaphorical. Heidegger, on the other hand, says virtually nothing about dreams. But he does take the possibility of the experience of 'something' we call 'nothing' seriously. Seriously? How can we take *that* seriously? How can we even begin to talk about nothing, when nothing is precisely the absence of anything to talk about? Should we not dismiss this outright as pure speculation, or metaphysical nonsense, as a famous logical positivist from the Vienna Circle once did?³ Heidegger does not just take seriously the possibility that there is something to nothing. He takes this possibility as a decisive clue for investigating who we are, and so unveiling the meaning of our being, which he takes to be the very goal and *raison d'être* of philosophy. Far from minimising the significance of my dream, it was as if Heidegger's text allowed me to envisage it as an entirely legitimate and, as it turned out, privileged point of

entry into this mode of questioning, and this infinitely varied universe we call philosophy.

Not until I had come across Heidegger's short lecture from 1929, then, was I able to gain concrete insight into the relevance of an experience – a dream – that I knew was of great significance even as a child, and that had the power to reveal something essential about myself. When reading Heidegger's text, it was as if words were finally coming to my rescue, such was their evocative power and their scientific rigour. Step by step, little by little, Heidegger introduces his reader to the reality of nothingness, which he locates in the state of mind or, better said perhaps, the 'mood' or 'attunement' (*Stimmung*) we call anxiety. Unlike fear, which is always fear of something, anxiety is the feeling generated by the experience of the withdrawal and the vanishing of all things. But in the withdrawing of all things, does everything really vanish, or is there something that remains? Is there something in addition to, or, better said perhaps, in excess of, things – a residue, as it were, but a decisive one, insofar as it would point to that to which we human beings find ourselves exposed, and so destined, as to our own, singular essence, a remainder that, moreover, would set philosophical thought on its course? How can we begin to articulate this residue, this elusive 'something', which is not a thing, if not as the 'something in general', as the 'there is' from which all things emerge? But this 'there is' in general, does it not also coincide with myself, independently of anything to which it can be directed? After all, was it not myself, and myself alone, who remained in my dream, despite and beyond the vanishing of everything else? Was my sense of dread not born of this most unusual and, in fact, uncanny situation, in which I found myself alone with myself, and came face to face with myself, my pure, naked self as it were, as opposed to the task or the thing at hand, which characterizes my habitual relation to the world? But who is this 'self', and can it be envisaged independently of the world it experiences? After all, isn't the world that I experience and that surrounds me something like an extension of myself, and isn't my self constituted through its many relations to that world?

The experience of my dream was one in which I was suddenly faced with myself as this being that is ordinarily surrounded by a manifold of things, for the most part familiar, and immersed in a world (*Welt*), or an environment (*Umwelt*), which I normally navigate quite effortlessly, and quite naturally call *mine*. In fact, this world that I call mine, and that is so utterly familiar, is familiar to the point that, for the most part, I am not even aware of its presence. I carry it with me everywhere, as it were; I cannot dissociate myself, or my own being, from it, and for that very reason its presence is never an issue. It is as if, as a distinct phenomenon, as something we could interrogate and describe philosophically, it was always covered over in those very dealings it enabled, always concealed in the very habits and automatic operations of everyday life it made possible. This world, *my* world, or this world that I do not so much possess as *am*, this worldliness that seems to designate who I am, is in fact not unlike Poe's famous purloined letter: so obviously there, so evidently, patently present

before my eyes, so close to myself, that I cannot actually see it for what it is, that I actually fail to see it. This purloined world is the positive phenomenon which, Heidegger suggests, philosophy must turn to as a matter of urgency, and learn to *see*. To see what always and from the start stands before our eyes is perhaps the most difficult task. To direct our gaze, which, naturally as it were, directs itself towards objects and things in the world, back towards ourselves, and describe conceptually what and how we see the world, amounts to a very delicate operation, and one that raises complex, methodological questions.

Had it not been for the resources made available to him by Husserl and his phenomenology, Heidegger would have never been able to carry out the task he set for philosophy. Phenomenological training is all about learning to *see* the things themselves, and seeing the world and our position within it exactly as it is. Reading Husserl, and putting the phenomenological method to work in various contexts, Heidegger once argued, was like having scales fall off his eyes, and discovering the world as if for the first time. At this very early stage of our enquiry, we need not develop a proper exposition of phenomenology as the method providing the correct access to the phenomenon under investigation. Anticipating this exposition, we can simply emphasize the part that this method played in Heidegger's ability to direct philosophical thought back towards our own concrete being, allowing him to see things in the way in which they present themselves, from themselves as it were.

Returning to my dream, let me simply stress how the absence of familiar objects and beings, or the dissolution into nothingness of the things I had learned to rely on over the years as an extension of myself, and had invested with my emotions, my hopes and desires, my habits, how, in other words, the lack of anything – no matter how fantastical – to relate to, had the mysterious power of revealing my self to myself, of bringing to the fore the very worldliness that is normally covered over in my everyday dealings. By depriving me of anything familiar, and so by revealing myself as a stranger to myself, my dream had uncovered an essential trait of my being, if not its basic truth, namely, the fact that this being that I am cannot be dissociated from the world that surrounds it. Paradoxically, by suspending my relation to anything concrete in the world, by neutralizing the world as the task at hand, or as the local situation in which I usually find myself, and with which I must deal, my dream had brought me face to face with myself as this being that is irreducibly *in* and *of* the world, as the being to which worldliness belongs essentially. In certain experiences, which we could call limit-experiences, this familiar and reassuring life we call ours dissolves into nothingness, leaving ourselves in a state of existential nakedness and generating in the process a feeling of deep anxiety. This is the very loss I had experienced as a child on many occasions. What traumatized me was in fact the opposite of what I had initially taken it to be, namely, a loss: it was the experience of an excess, an irreducible residue, and the uncanny sense of coming face to face with my own being. What my dream had uncovered was the phenomenon of world itself, as well as the extent to which I do not exist independently of it. It had done so by allowing me to

experience the world as something that exists, yet not as the sum of all existing things.

Now this phenomenon is one that might strike the reader as obvious. And in a way, Heidegger's sole ambition was to make this obvious phenomenon conceptually transparent. Yet if it seems obvious to most, it is all the more surprising that, at least according to Heidegger, the philosophical tradition seems to have gone to so much trouble to bury it under a series of metaphysical abstractions. As a result, the tradition in question must itself be subjected to the most rigorous critical analysis or, more appropriately, to a systematic *Destruktion* (a 'destruction' that is more a deconstruction or a destructuring than a straightforward annihilation). Through this deconstruction alone will the phenomenon in question be allowed to (re)surface and occupy centre stage.⁴ Among the many abstractions of the philosophical tradition which hindered a proper access to the being of the human being stands the distinction, almost immediately fixed into a dualism, between man and world. This dualism has run deep ever since Descartes introduced it at the dawn of modern philosophy. It establishes a crucial distinction between who we are, or the being of the human, understood as a 'thinking thing' (*res cogitans*), and the being of the world, understood as 'extended matter' (*res extensa*). The human, this metaphysical construction stipulates, is a self-positing and autonomous thinking substance, which exists independently of the world it faces. The being of the human is ontologically distinct from that of the world. As a result, man can access the world through his own essence as a thinking substance only, or at least primarily and most significantly. Thought is itself understood as the ability to represent and formalize, and knowing as a metaphysical and mathematical-physical enterprise. This is the basis on which an encounter with the world takes place. In turn, the world is itself subordinated to its ability to be known, or represented, whether physically or metaphysically. And it is for that very reason that it can only be envisaged as extended, inert matter. This corresponds to the view of the world that is implicit in the physics of Galileo and Newton, and marks a turning point in the manner in which nature, and man's position in its midst, is envisaged. Heidegger's reaction to this metaphysical conception of the world and of ourselves is to say that we exist only in and through our relation to the world, that we, as human beings, are nothing independent from, and in addition to, our being-in-the-world. This means that we are not a substance, and not a thing, but, precisely, an existence, always and irreducibly open to and onto the world, always moving ourselves within a certain pre-theoretical *understanding* of it. Openness to the world is what defines our being, not thought. Thought is one way – and indeed a distinct way – of 'understanding' the world, or of comporting ourselves towards it. But it is certainly not the only way, nor indeed the primordial one.

To the extent that my reader is already familiar with aspects of Western philosophy, and with modern philosophy in particular, he or she will have already noticed the singular nature of Heidegger's approach. Some of what he says may resonate with aspects of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's philosophy, or with the